Irish Immigrants Pursued a Better Life in Fairbury

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Many people emigrated from Ireland to Fairbury to work in the coal mines. Author Theresa Ripley researched her family's genealogy and published the results in a 2012 book titled Irish Roots: Finding the O'Sullivans. Through her research, Theresa tried to imagine what life was like for her great-grandparents, Patrick Sullivan (1840-1917) and Honora Creedon (1836-1901).

Both Patrick Sullivan and Honora Creedon were born near Limerick, Ireland. They grew up during the Potato Famine in Ireland. A potato blight wiped out the potato crop, a significant food source in Ireland. During this famine, about one million people died, and another million left Ireland. The island's population fell between 20% and 25%.

Patrick's mother and a sister both died of famine. So many people died that wakes and funerals were abbreviated. Coffins were in short supply, so special coffins were constructed with hinges on the bottom panel. These special coffins were lowered into the graves. The hinges were then unlocked, releasing the body to lay in the grave. These special coffins were then raised and were used over and over again. In some cases, the small houses were pulled down over the bodies inside and then burned.

Patrick Sullivan and Honora Creedon were married on February 14, 1858. Patrick was 18 years old, and Honora was 22 years old. As was the custom of that era, their marriage was arranged by their parents. The Creedon family had to pay a dowry to Patrick's family.

A few months after they were married, Patrick's brother Jerry decided to emigrate to America. In those days, the families knew they would probably never see their family members again after they left for America.

The custom at that time was to have a live wake for the person emigrating to America. It was a farewell party. This live wake typically went on for two days with fun, games, and drinking. Jerry Sullivan left Ireland and settled in New York.

Patrick and Honora Sullivan had two children in Ireland. In 1863, they decided their family had a brighter future in America. They did not have enough money to travel by steamship, so they paid for the 70-day passage on a sailing ship. For the long journey, they packed a water can, washbasin, baking dish, can for drinking, a pot to hang on the stove for heating, dishes, and silverware. They packed a minimal amount of clothing.

The Sullivan family left Liverpool on May 15, 1863, and arrived in New York 63 days later. As steerage passengers, they were holed up in the lower decks of the ship. The

family had little water, and keeping clean was difficult. Vermin and filth were their companions on the trip.

The journey started calmly, but 20 days into the journey, the storm came and lasted for eight days. The waves would break upon the deck, and to the people below, it sounded like the ship was going to break apart. The utter terror occurred when they could hear the sailors being called by the captain's trumpet to upper deck was a fear they had have never known before or after. They knew the trumpet sounded only at worst of times; and however bad it was then, it would be getting worse.

The air was foul because they were locked below deck for the duration of the week's storm. The passengers were thrown from one side to the other as the ship rolled, and their fear for their young children being crushed to death was real. Some passengers were crushed to death. Water came through from the deck above. Their beds were soaked, and the water on the floor was ankle-deep. The family thought, wrongly, that the ship was sinking. Of course, they could not have lanterns lit, and they had not cooked in days. Patrick and Honora had nightmares for the rest of their lives in which they heard the shrieking and crying of men, women, and children from those days.

About 5% of the ship's passengers died en route because of the combination of sickness, horrible accommodations, unhealthy conditions, and violent storms. After surviving the terrible trip across the Atlantic, Patrick was able to find his brother Jerry in New York City.

In 1865, after living for two years in New York City, Patrick's family and his brother Jerry decided to move to Fairbury, Illinois. They chose Fairbury because of the coal mining jobs that were available. Fairbury was in a boom mode with the population zooming from 269 in 1860 to 2,140 in 1880.

In the 1870 U.S. Census, the Patrick Sullivan family was living in Fairbury. By that time, they had five children. Patrick's occupation was a coal miner. In the 1880 Census, the Patrick Sullivan family had grown to eight members, and Patrick was still a coal miner.

Coal mining was an arduous and dangerous occupation. At least nine men lost their lives while mining coal in Fairbury mines. Patrick Sullivan saved his money and was able to quit the coal mines and become a farmer around 1890. In January of 1901, Honora Sullivan experienced a stroke at the age of 65. She died four days later. Her husband and nine children survived her. She was laid to rest in the Catholic Cemetery in Fairbury.

A few years after Honora's death, Patrick moved to Bloomington. He passed away at St. Joseph's hospital in Bloomington in 1817. He was 77 years old and was buried with his wife at the Fairbury Catholic Cemetery. In his will, Patrick Sullivan left $33,000 for his children. This amount would be equivalent to $670,000 in today's dollars.

The lives of Patrick and Honora Sullivan are a typical example of people who emigrated from European countries to Fairbury in the hope of improving the lives of themselves and

their children. They accomplished their goals and were valuable contributors to the Fairbury society.

They are buried in Fairbury's Catholic Cemetery north of town.